NEHRU
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THE KING WHO PLAYED MARBLES

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The little kingdom was plunged in darkness. There were no festivities, no sounds of music or laughter. Grief was writ large on the faces of the people and the lamps in the palace burned low.

Outside the curtained bedroom of the young ruler, the men and women who worked for him stood and sat in anxious postures, full of sorrow. Many were weeping softly.

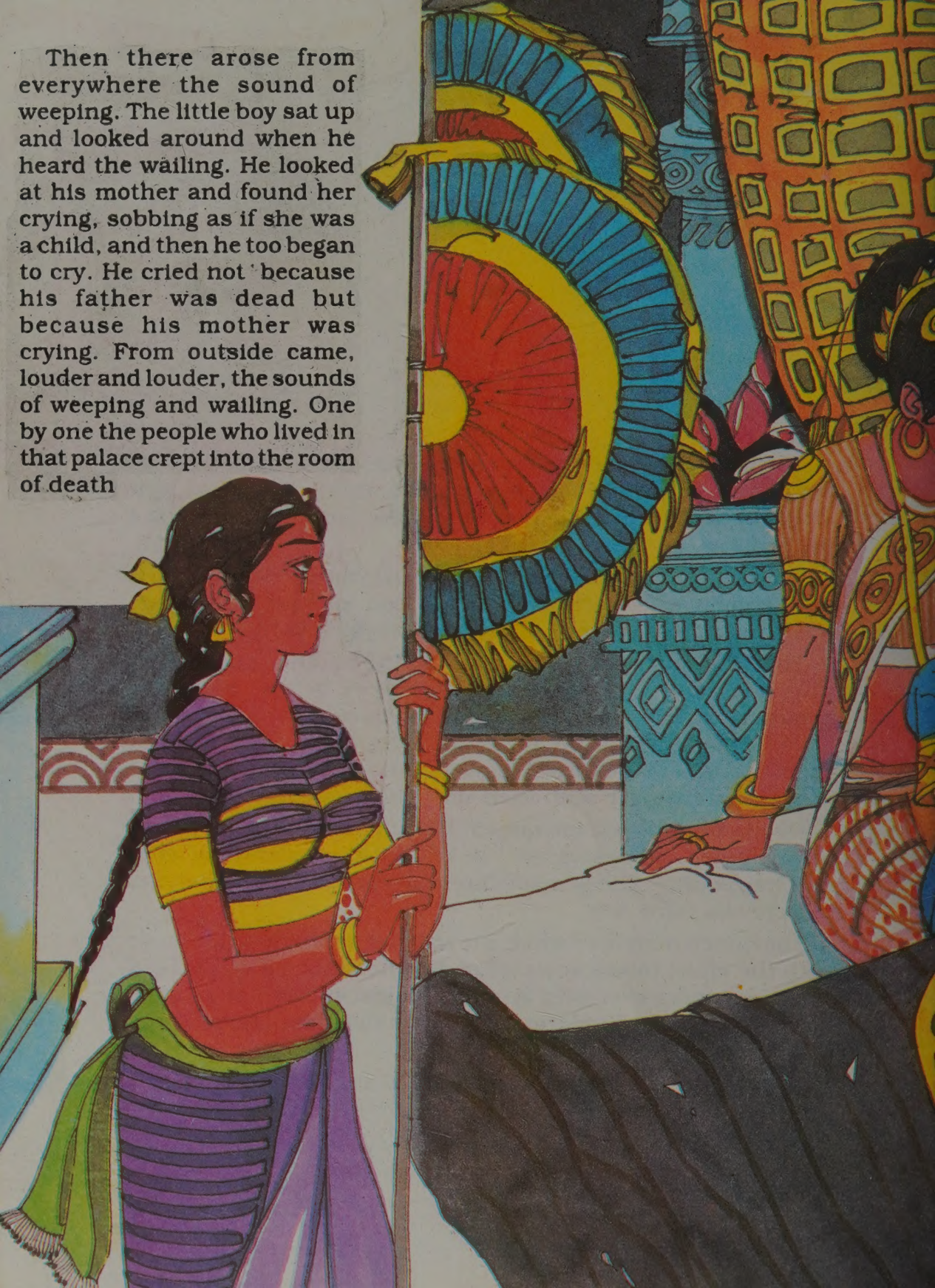
The king was ill. He was on his deathbed. The short illness that had struck so suddenly but a week before, had been pronounced beyond treatment by the doctors who had come from far and wide at the Prime Minister's call. They had put their heads together and tried every possible medicine... but death was stronger than their medical knowledge.

By his bedside sat the queen. His son, who was not yet all of nine years, sat beside her. The boy did not understand what was happening. The queen's face was suffused with grief and her cheeks were wet.

The queen bent over when she saw her husband's lips move with the effort to say something. But he made no sound. His eyes, brimming over with farewell, looked at them. His hands moved. The queen understood. Gently she placed in them the little boy's hands.

The father held the boy's hands for a moment and then gave himself up to death.

Then there arose from everywhere the sound of weeping. The little boy sat up and looked around when he heard the wailing. He looked at his mother and found her crying, sobbing as if she was a child, and then he too began to cry. He cried not because his father was dead but because his mother was crying. From outside came, louder and louder, the sounds of weeping and wailing. One by one the people who lived in that palace crept into the room of death



On the death of the king, his nine year old son was made the new ruler. Weeks passed and life with all its din returned to the palace, and to the kingdom beyond it.

The nine year old boy didn't know what it meant to be king. The crown felt heavy on his head and the rich robes and jewellery were hot and uncomfortable. He hated them. But children must obey their elders.

The good Prime Minister found a new importance and moved about busily. He told the queen that he would give all help to the little king, guide him, teach him and make him a good ruler, an ideal king. The queen mother remained silent. She watched the boy as he moved about in the palace compound and left him to his own whims. She did not say a thing.

The Prime Minister grew in power as he began ruling the little kingdom in the name of the boy king. He saw himself as serving the state as a guardian of the fatherless child. Within him was a burning zeal to serve the boy and shape him into an ideal king, as his father and grand father had been before him. He seemed to live for that goal alone and no other.

The boy was full of fun and playing marbles was one of his passions.

He loved marbles. He collected them from wherever he could. His pockets were full of them and so were the gold and silver and ivory boxes and caskets that he had received as gifts from dignitaries on royal occasions. There were marbles hidden away in the drawers of the palace furniture and behind the paintings of royal ancestors that hung in the corridors, and statues that stood in the halls.

They were marbles of all sizes, colours and designs and ages. He would take them out from where he had hidden them and feel them in his hands. Turning them over, he would look at them, marvel at the sight of them, and thrill to hear the music they made as they rolled about and rattled against each other. Their clatter delighted him and he listened to them as he walked. Often he would suddenly break into a trot while running just to hear the sounds marbles made.

Very soon he discovered hiding places — under the ornate old bedsteads, behind the heavy curtains, in nooks and corners — any place to avoid the Prime Minister and his sermons on self-improvement and the art of statecraft and governing. The Prime Minister was always looking for an opportunity to train the young mind with his endless lessons. But the boy was quicker and learnt how to slip away as he saw him come or heard his heavy tread. And whenever and wherever he could, he played with his marbles. How he loved them! In his mind he talked to them and heard them reply and at night he dreamt of them.

The Prime Minister sat worried. The boy was not learning the realities of life. He seemed not to understand at all that he was no ordinary child but a king who must look after the affairs of his kingdom. He seemed not in the least interested in the pains the Prime Minister was taking to bring him up and educate him as a monarch. Perhaps, secretly the old man was afraid that, he would never, at this rate, go down in history as a great administrator, the wise guardian whose hand had guided the young king.

He was a devoted servant of the royal family and he often came to the queen and to be true to himself, told her about the need for stricter control over the boy. "He is too playful," he would complain. "He does not realize his responsibilities." On and on he would speak, "He has no aim, no goal in life."

The queen listened to him. She nodded and said, "Perhaps we must leave him alone and let him play. He's just a boy. When he grows older, he'll change."

But the Prime Minister scarcely heard her, so full was he of his own thoughts.

One day he confronted the little king and spoke to him using a mixture of sternness, kindness, tact and persuasion in his tone.

"You must be serious," he said. "A King must pay attention to the affairs of his people."

Was there also in that tone a hidden threat, a warning ? The boy felt his lips tremble—and when he spoke his words came haltingly. "I'll do what you say," he stammered. "I really will... but... I want someone to play with... I want to play marbles."

The Prime Minister's heart gave a little leap. Here was a way to bring about a change in the child and influence his young and pliant mind.

"Why didn't you tell me before ?" he said. "I have a nephew at home, about your age. I could bring him to the palace and you could play together. He too is fond of marbles and has a collection, though not as large as the one you have. Nevertheless, I am sure that you will enjoy his company and like to have him as your friend."

The little king jumped with joy at the prospect of meeting a boy who could play marbles and who had his own collection of them.

"When will he come ?"

"What's his name ?"

"Is he taller than me ?"

"May he stay in the palace sometimes ?"

His eyes shone and his questions came thick and fast and the Prime Minister was pleased. He saw a ray of hope in this new friendship and confidence. Now he would use this chance and train the boy to be a capable ruler.

The nephew came. The boys became friends. They ran about the palace and talked and discussed their activities. And they played marbles. Now the little king had someone to share his secrets with.

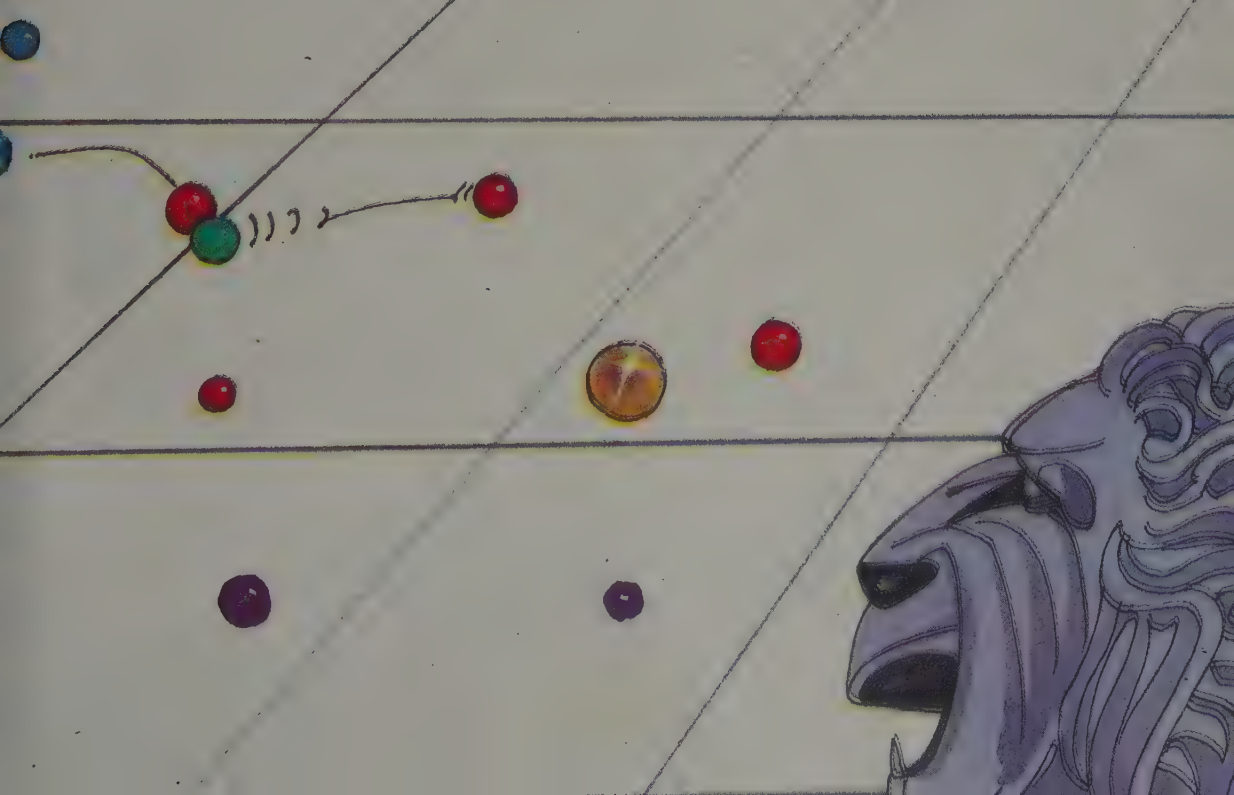
They examined each other's marbles, evaluated them, shook their heads over flaws, laughed to see them roll about and marvelled at the changing colours.

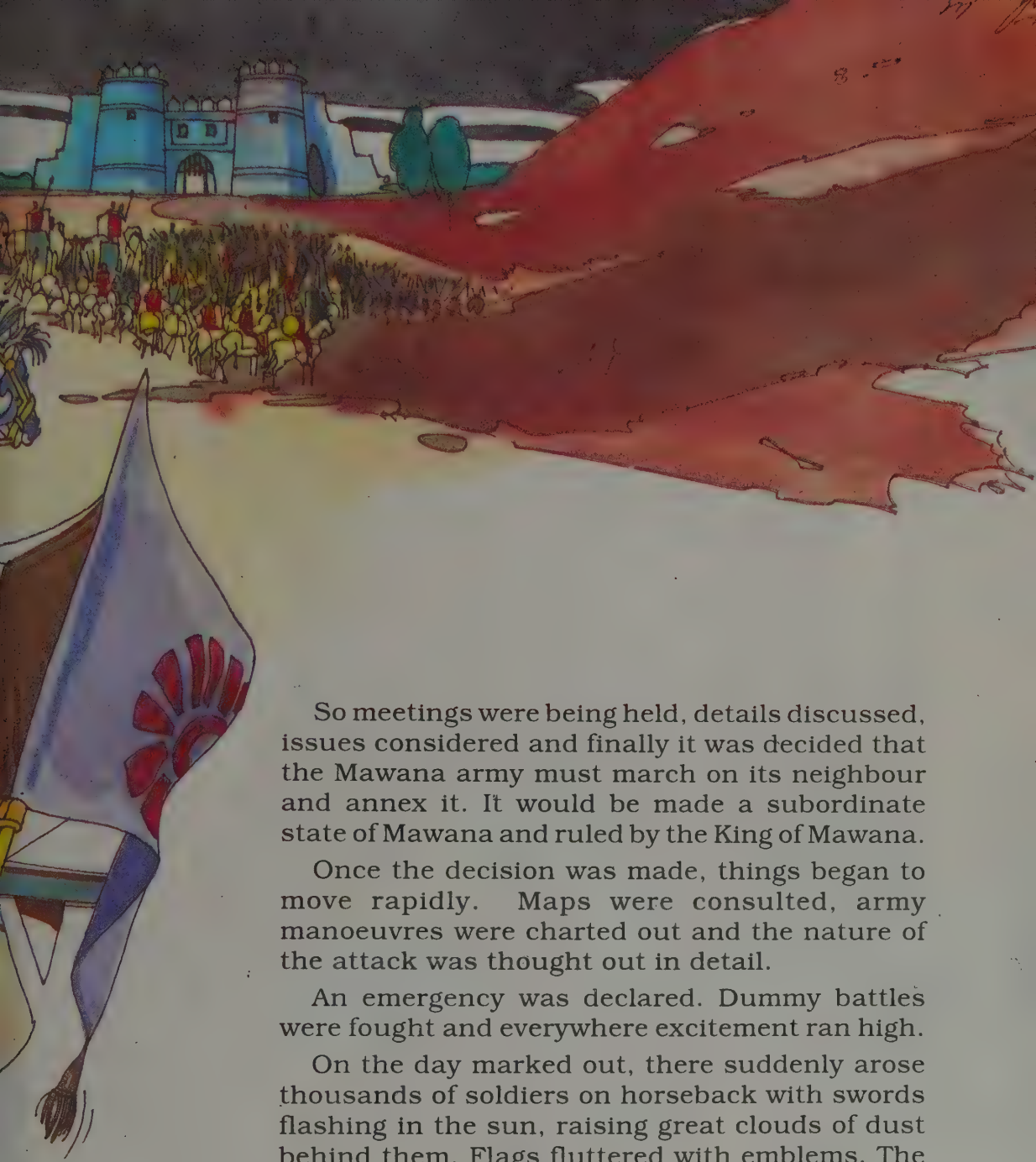
"It's like magic," declared the little king holding a large marble with ruby red whorls between his fingers and thumb. "I've never seen one like it before.It's a giant of a marble," the other boy answered. "Where did you get it?" "Can't remember," the king said. "It doesn't matter anyway. Come, let's not waste time talking, let's play."

And he dropped down on his haunches and with a flick of his fingers sent the marble spinning and bouncing and skipping over the polished floors.

"Good shot!" cried the Prime Minister's nephew. "That was beautiful." And he returned the king's shot with one of his own sparkling blue and yellow marble.

But while the two boys were playing, something else was happening outside in the world of men. The ruler of the neighboring kingdom of Mawana and his ministers were hatching a plan to march on the boy king's territory. The news had reached them of the death of the boy's father and they saw it as the right moment to attack the small kingdom. They felt that it surely must be vulnerable, perhaps torn by internal rivalry and strife.that it surely must be vulnerable, perhaps torn by internal rivalry and strife.





So meetings were being held, details discussed, issues considered and finally it was decided that the Mawana army must march on its neighbour and annex it. It would be made a subordinate state of Mawana and ruled by the King of Mawana.

Once the decision was made, things began to move rapidly. Maps were consulted, army manoeuvres were charted out and the nature of the attack was thought out in detail.

An emergency was declared. Dummy battles were fought and everywhere excitement ran high.

On the day marked out, there suddenly arose thousands of soldiers on horseback with swords flashing in the sun, raising great clouds of dust behind them. Flags fluttered with emblems. The cavalry was followed by a hundred trumpeting elephants and their riders. Behind them came the soldiers on foot, their battle cries rending the air.

They brandished their weapons as they marched to conquer. Under their thundering feet the earth shook to its very depths, and above their gleaming helmeted heads the sky was black as death itself.

Birds screeched, animals ran helter-skelter, the trees held their breath and the blades of grass clung to each other.

Such was the fury of this man-made storm.

In the little boy king's land life went on undisturbed, for no one knew of Mawana's dastardly plan or movements. The game of marbles continued in the large central hall. In the kitchens food was being cooked as usual. In the kingdom outside the palace, men tired after work sipped tea while women sat at their doorsteps, sewing and knitting as they exchanged tit-bits of gossip ; children ran about, yelling, shouting, laughing, crying—noisy as children always are, having just returned from school.

A mother sang and hummed as she patted her child to sleep. In the homes lamps were being lit as the sun set.

A dead body was being carried with mournful chants to the cremation ground. Nobody knew what awaited them as they engaged themselves in their daily chores.

It was midnight when the Prime Minister was woken up and informed that the huge army of Mawana had surrounded the little kingdom.

Mawana ! The Prime Minister felt a hollowness in the pit of his stomach. He knew his country was no match for their mighty neighbour. It would be defeated in no time.

"It must be kept a secret," was the Prime Minister's first thought. "There should be no panic ... or we shall suffer a heavy loss of life and property...." He then sat down in his bedside chair, thinking and thinking of what could be done. After a while he decided that the queen should be informed. It was his duty to do so. He began to send her messages; keeping in constant touch with her and informing her in detail of the events that were taking place. "At any cost we must avert the danger that looms before us." He told her, "We must avert bloodshed and destruction." The queen agreed with him. "We must surrender," the Prime Minister went on, "We must surrender unconditionally."

And so a small group of officers was sent to the Commander-in-Chief of the invading army with the message of unconditional surrender.

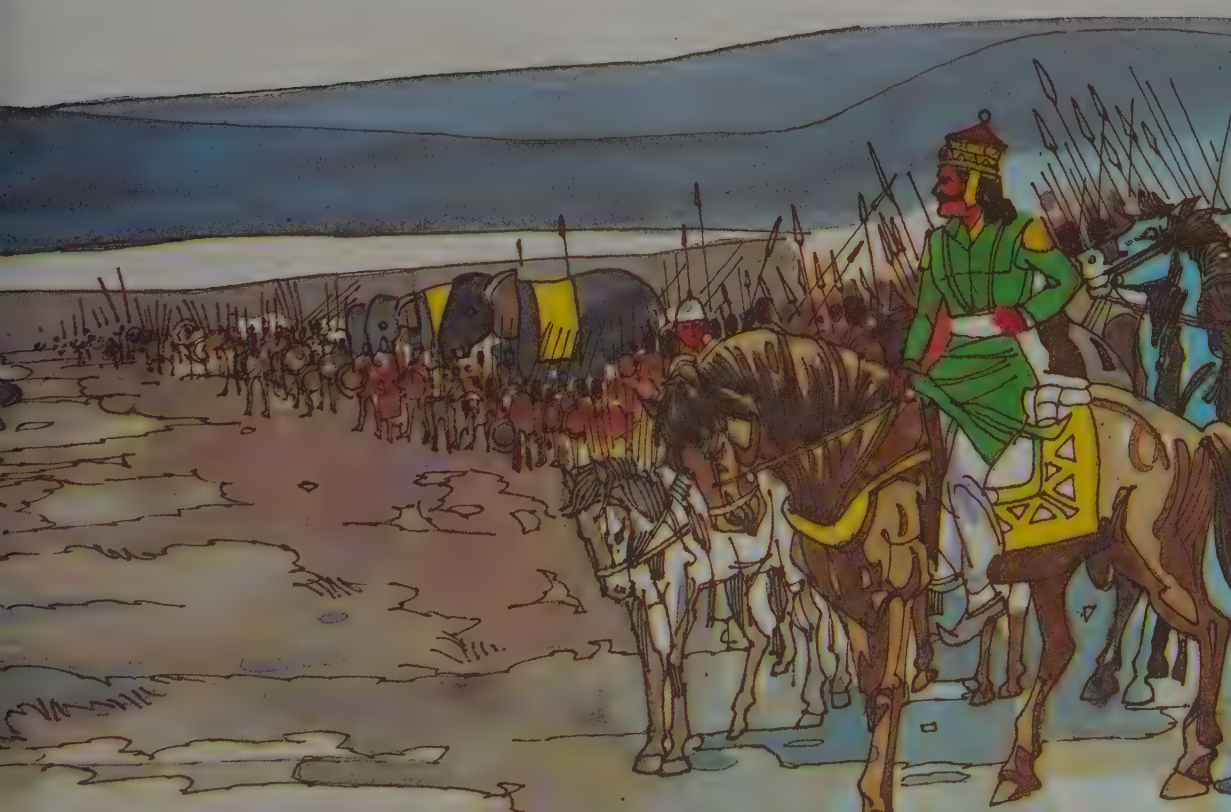
Suddenly the situation changed completely. The horsemen reined in their horses. The elephant riders looked about not sure what to do next. The foot soldiers moved about uneasily,shifting their weight from one foot to another.

There had been orders to halt operations. Tents were pitched and suddenly the officers went into them to hold meetings instead of giving marching orders.

When they reappeared there was no mention of attacking the kingdom. The soldiers didn't know that a major decision had been taken. The Commander-in-Chief was to be sent to the little kingdom. He was to take it over, enter the palace and arrest all the important people, including the king.

They waited, restless and straining like dogs at the leash. And when they heard of the unconditional surrender they felt cheated and let down.

However, the Commander-in-Chief mounted his horse. The animal seemed to sense the importance of its rider and like a disciplined soldier galloped with its mount towards the city gates and took him straight to the palace.



At the palace the Commander-in-Chief dismounted. He arranged his uniform and looked down at his riding boots. Then,satisfied with his appearance, he looked up.

He was surprised. There was no one to receive him. He went up the steps and entered the portals of the palace. As he walked through the ante-chambers he was amazed that there was no one to greet him. He heard voices...

"Good! Good shot! Now watch me. Hey! where's mine gone?"

"Children!" the Commander-in-Chief said in surprise.

Suddenly he was in the central durbar hall where the most amazing sight greeted him.

Instead of a king sitting on a throne surrounded by nobles and courtiers he saw two boys crouched on the floor, playing marbles. He stood there rooted to the spot. The boys didn't see him, so engrossed were they in their game. He stood for quite a while before he decided to give a discreet cough or two...and then one of the little boys looked up and saw him. Their eyes met.

"Who are you?" asked the little boy, a marble still between his fingers. In spite of his surprise the man answered:

"I am the Commander-in-Chief of the Maharaja of Mawana." Then he added, "I am here to take over the palace."

"Take over the palace?" cried the boy. "What for ?"

"We have taken over this kingdom," said the Commander-in-Chief. "I am here with orders to take over the palace and arrest the king."

"But I am the king," laughed the boy. "And just now you can see I am busy. I'm playing marbles. You can't disturb me now. You may arrest me if you like, after I have finished playing."

He spoke so fearlessly and with such frankness and innocence that the man was taken aback. Something in that voice and those eyes and that manner touched him and he murmured : "Yes.... it shall be so."

And all the while he watched as the children resumed their game.

He found himself enjoying it. Then once more the boy king spoke : "Why are you standing there? Come and join us. You'll like it."

He needed no second bidding. The next minute he was down on his knees. He held out his hands. Some marbles were generously given to him by both the boys. He began to play, yelling in excitement, cheating a little now and then, watching the shots keenly, waiting for his turn and playing a little better each time it came. He had forgotten his mission, he had forgotten himself and his importance and the military uniform he was wearing that indicated his high rank. He had forgotten the King of Mawana too, his master who was waiting for him.

The King of Mawana grew impatient; he fretted and fumed. Why had his Commander-in-Chief not returned with the prisoners of war?

Finally he decided to investigate the matter himself. He rode all the way to the palace, in all his regal splendour; his riding breeches and jacket made of the finest silk were a perfect fit, with not a crease on them. The medals on his chest shone and glistened as if they would outdo the morning sun as it climbed higher into the sky. When he came to the palace of the boy king he dismounted. A gaping servant took away his horse, and he marched in with the supreme confidence that

can only come from generations of kingship.

He heard children's voices... and then he heard a voice he knew—a man's voice he had heard many times. It was the voice of his Commander-in-Chief. He stopped and listened. He realized that it was indeed the Commander-in-Chief... and two of them... two children.

"Good shot!"

"That was a beauty!"

"My turn!"

"You cheated!"

"No. I didn't!"

"Give me another chance."

"That green and black one's mine."

Baffled, the King walked on in the direction of the voices and found himself standing at the magnificent entrance of the durbar hall.

He was horrified to see before him his Commander-in-Chief sitting on his haunches. He was playing marbles with two children!

The King of Mawana couldn't believe his eyes.

Has all the world suddenly gone mad?

For one second he could not trust himself to speak. Then recovering himself and finding his voice he roared, "Have you taken leave of your senses? What are you doing? Shame! Shame on you! I sent you to take over the palace and arrest the king and here I see you playing marbles with two children!"

He choked on his words. His face had turned a fiery red and his eyes glowered. The three players looked up.

There were signs of irritation on their faces at this unexpected interruption. The boy king saw the newcomer and looked him up and down from top to toe.

"Go away, you funny man," he said. "You're disturbing our game. You have no right to do that ...." He then went back to his marbles and said: "Who are you, any way? And,what do you want? I've never seen you before.... How did you get in?"

The King of Mawana was taken aback, but pulled himself together. Drawing himself up to his full height he said: "I am the King of Mawana, and that man there is my Commander-in-Chief."

The boy bent low to take a close look at the position of the marbles. Then, "flick" he sent a shining little globe towards its fellow until it just touched the other without dislodging it. He had with that one swift and delicate stroke changed the entire scene. Now he eyed the man standing near him and spoke:

"You may be a king but that doesn't give you the right to disturb a game...."

There was nothing the King of Mawana could do but agree. But he was uncomfortable about it. A little chit of a boy—was

the thought that came to him.But he could not help admiring the child's frankness and courage.

The boy looked at him again.

"Is that your crown?"

"It is,"the King said haughtily.

"You look funny in it," the boy went on. "Take it off, you really look funny."

Nobody had ever said that to him. The King of Mawana was shaken but he did what the boy asked him to do. He placed the crown in a niche in the wall. The fact was that he was coming under the spell of the little globes of coloured glass....

"Wouldn't you like to join us?" the little king asked, and the King of Mawana nodded.

"Come on then," said the boy.

The King of Mawana began to lower himself into the squatting position of all good marble players. But his clothes were too tight.

"You'll have to take off that coat," the boy suggested helpfully. "You'll never be able to play a proper game in that."

The King of Mawana saw logic in the boy's suggestion.

"What are all those clinking metal things?" asked the boy.

"Those," said the mighty ruler of Mawana "are medals I was given for winning wars... for courage, for heroism...." He paused a little before the last sentence.

"I am considered a mighty warrior and renowned for my bravery."

At this the boy said ;

"For winning wars? You're joking! How can winning a war be bravery? I know about war... people are killed in war... men, women, children...they're killed and their homes are destroyed.... Oh! How can war be bravery...?"

The King of Mawana took off his coat and folded it so that the medals would not show. Somehow he did not feel pride in them now.

He loosened the gem-studded leather belt and took off the silken breeches. Suddenly, he felt a lightness of body and heart that he had not known since he had been a little boy the same age as the two before him.

The Commander-in-Chief was bending low and taking careful aim with a marble. The King of Mawana held his breath as he watched.

"Flick."

"You missed!" cried the King. "I did not," cried the Commander-in-Chief. "It touched the other."

"You're cheating," cried the King. "My turn now."

Soon the durbar hall rang with the voices of the four marble players and the sound of marbles.

When the sun began to go down they were still playing.

The Prime Minister who had been busy preparing the document on the unconditional surrender stamped the last of the papers with the royal seal and then went out to look for the little king.

At the entrance of the durbar hall he stopped, his jaw fell and his eyes popped out in astonishment. He was an astute man and it did not take him more than a few seconds to recognize the King of Mawana and the Commander-in-Chief even though neither was in official robes. While he stood gaping he heard the sound of marching soldiers.

"It's the army from Mawana, Sir," announced a servant. "They have come to see what the matter is and why the King and the Commander-in-Chief have not returned."

The King looked up and recognized his soldiers. "Come on in," he shouted. "Come and join us." Then remembering the kingly manners he had been taught he turned to the boy king and asked leave of him.

"By all means," answered the boy king. "There are marbles in my collection for everyone of them to play."

The durbar hall echoed with the sound of marbles.

Pages of the peace treaty went up in smoke.

The children went to school. Men to their work.

Lullabies were sung.

Smoke rose from the kitchen.

Life went on undisturbed.

In the little kingdom nobody ever knew that the Mawanas had once surrounded them.

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